

Reports by RAZAK AHMAD, CHRISTINA CHIN and CHIA ZHI ZHI

# Cheating at the tertiary level

## Many online firms offering more than proofreading services

**PETALING JAYA:** Research and writing are big challenges for any Master's or PhD student, but there is a shortcut for those willing to pay.

There are many services available online, which offer to proofread and even provide content for Master's and PhD theses or dissertations.

It takes mere minutes to secure their services, as long as you are willing to pay up to US\$3,500 (RM14,350) to have your Master's thesis written for you by writers who are experts in your field of study.

Some providers offer an entirely legal and ethical proofreading service in order to brush up on the language in the student's work.

Unscrupulous ones however go a step beyond by offering students content or primary data to include in their thesis or dissertation, which is tantamount to cheating.

"Proofreading services are normal but anything that goes beyond that, for example offering to pro-

vide data, is unethical and could be a criminal offence," said lawyer Datuk Baljit Singh Sidhu.

He said students who submit theses or dissertations containing data provided by such service providers could be charged under the Penal Code for cheating.

A search online revealed many companies and individuals offering to proofread student assignments, theses and dissertations.

A customer agent with one proofreading company, when asked whether his firm can help write a Master's thesis, asked for the field of study.

The agent for the company then said that he could offer primary data, secondary data and data analysis.

Primary data is data collected by a researcher from first-hand sources using methods like surveys, interviews or experiments.

Secondary data is information that is already available such as in journals or archives.

The agent said that while his firm cannot collect primary data from interviews with people, it can provide custom data sets generated by a questionnaire submitted by the customer.

Prices vary according to the length of the thesis and time needed for completion.

The agent said the price to write a 200-page Master's thesis in 60 days is US\$3,386.00 (RM13,882).

The price to merely proofread a 200-page paper is US\$1,706.60 (RM6,997), the agent said.

The company does not specify any physical address for its business but lists a US toll-free telephone line.

On its website, the companies claim that it employs professional academic writers from various backgrounds.

A second company which offers proofreading services offers an assurance that its finished product will pass plagiarism tests.

The company's website said its

editors use the latest tools for this purpose.

A third company offering proofreading services meanwhile charges US\$122 (RM500.20) to copy edit 2,000 words in six days.

A plagiarism check will cost an extra US\$100 (RM410) and for an additional US\$40 (RM164), the customer can ask the company to make further edits to the document.

Lawyer Bryan Ng Yih Miin said university students would be subject to a prohibition clause against plagiarism that is either included in the student handbook or contract between the student and university.

"The contract may have a clause saying that the university is entitled to disciplinary action in the event of contravention with the student handbook.

"That is where the university may then take legal action," said Ng.

He said postgraduate students who receive a research grant would also be subject to terms in the grant contract which forbids plagiarism.

## 'No excuse for hiring someone else to do your work'

**PETALING JAYA:** There's no excuse to hire someone to write your Master's thesis or PhD dissertation, said university students.

Nivashien Saravana Ganesalingam, a first year medical student at UCSI University, said students who do this have a procrastination problem.

"Language is not a barrier to complete your thesis because you can always get help from your English lecturer or your friends," she said.

She added that university students get a sufficient amount of time to finish their thesis.

"It is their procrastination problem which causes them to buy their thesis or ask others to do it for them in the end."

Darren Lee, a first year engineering student at Monash University, said people who hire others to do their paper lack not just skill but credibility.

"They should learn to be independent and finish their own work.

"If this practise becomes a habit, sooner or later, especially when they enter the work force, they may not be able to perform up to par," said Lee.

Wong Sook Wei, a second year history student at the National University of Singapore, said students who hire others to write their papers should realise the repercussions of their actions.

Wong said such actions were unfair to the other students who put in the effort to produce their own work.

"Why are undergraduate students unable to muster up the confidence to write their own theses?"

"Are they just plain lazy, or has the education system failed to equip them with the skills necessary to write a thesis?" Wong asked.

Albert Lim, a final year chemical engineering student from the University of Nottingham Malaysia, said students must be responsible to do all of their own work.

"It is genuinely unfair to have someone doing it for you because it is almost equivalent to buying your degree instead of earning it through hard work."

## Seniors cashing in on writing services

**PETALING JAYA:** Thesis assistance and outsourcing services are being widely promoted – especially on social media – among students and that is a problem among educators.

And, the Malaysian Association of Private Colleges and Universities (Mapcu) is seeing a growing culture of senior students doing the work of their juniors for money.

Mapcu president Datuk Dr Parmjit Singh said varsities and regulators are concerned.

These dubious services have also created suspicion against legitimate editing and proofreading services, he said.

"If the services were confined to spelling, grammar, structure, citations and references, it would raise the quality of a thesis.

"But, there are concerns that only the financially well-endowed students would be able to benefit from this and therefore leave the others at a disadvantage," he said.

"The role of thesis supervisors may also be undermined if students find it easier to use such services.

"There's a fine line between using such services and what may be seen

as plagiarism."

He said it was impossible to ban such services as they're easily accessible online.

Varsities must strengthen the processes by which students have to defend their work to check if they've received help beyond what's acceptable, he said.

Higher Education Department director-general Datin Paduka Dr Siti Hamisah Tapsir said students are only allowed to send their work for proofreading.

"Some students are not proficient in the English language and may need help to improve grammar and the clarity of their work. That's the only editing service that we allow.

"Students cannot seek external help for content. That must come 100% from the student themselves," she said.

"Students won't be allowed to even defend their work at the viva voce if the work is not theirs."

Universiti Putra Malaysia vice-chancellor Prof Datuk Dr Aini Ideris said UPM has no issues with students using thesis editing services for editorial purposes.



**No plagiarism:** Siti Hamisah and Parmjit said proofreading is the only service allowed for students.

Language and grammar is fine but students must be responsible for legal issues like plagiarism and copyright infringement, she said.

"Before a thesis can be accepted for examination, the supervisor will check the thesis and it's compulsory for students to submit a Turnitin – or any other software – report," she said, adding that the software checks for percentage of similarity (with other works) to avoid plagiarism. Turnitin is used to check against plagiarism.

While thesis editing is legal, Prof Dr Yang Farina Abdul Aziz, senior professor of Inorganic Chemistry at

Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), said writing the thesis for a student, isn't right.

Prof Yang Farina, who's also an Academy of Sciences Malaysia fellow, has supervised over 50 postgraduate students.

"My students send their thesis for English editing. That's fine.

"But I will look at the content to make sure that it's written by them.

"They cannot just provide the information and pay someone else to do the writing," she said.

Prof Dr Hanafi Ismail, from Universiti Sains Malaysia's School of Materials and Mineral Resources Engineering, said writing services are unethical.

Students caught engaging such services should be punished in accordance with the respective varsity regulations, he said.

Prof Hanafi, who was listed among the "Most Cited Researchers" in the Shanghai Academic Ranking of World Universities 2016 by subjects, said proofreading services are okay.

"The papers are written by the students or researchers."